REPONSE TO RICHARD BERNSTEIN

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If I were to compress Dewey into a single sentence it would be as follows: "Live like an art object striving to become a work of art." In unpacking his essence I would have to locate, identify, and explain the existence, the functions, the interrelations, and the meanings of events and objects; the instrumental and the consummatory; evolution, experience, and communication; community and democracy; the historical necessities, no longer valid, of various dualisms; the relation of theory to practice; the centrality of education to our human being.

Richard Bernstein's John Dewey Society Lecture, "The Varieties of Pluralism" under the same severe compression would emerge as "Keep the Faith. Phronesis realized is democratic pluralism. Act so as to connect." Unpacking Dewey is easier than unpacking Bernstein. All of Dewey is present, before us, as it were. But the Bernstein lecture is the Bernstein lecture--a piece of writing given strength and also partially undone by the conditions of its final cause. It is writing of a certain length, constructed to be presented as a public event, intended to inform, to instruct, to caution and advise, and to give strength to any flagging spirits among us. And this it did, and does, demonstrating enviable knowledge and masterful control of the history of pragmatism and the rise and fall of the hegemony of analytic philosophy, presenting valuable insights respecting the development of "wild pluralism," and offering a timely reminder of how metaphysics informs social thought...and much more.

But I find myself torn by "Varieties of Pluralism," both attracted and disturbed by it. I want something more, something more speculatively audacious (see again Dewey's call for speculative audacity with which Bernstein concludes his lecture, p. 18) than phronesis, yet I am not sure there is something more. Within the limits imposed by the lecture there is not. I also find the lecture facing a large, ironic problem, one of

Bernstein's own making. Although it is public event, the lecture is not July Fourth oratory; it is learned discourse. It exists within a context consisting in part of John Dewey, Praxis and Action, The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory, and Beyond Objectivism and Relativism. I find it impossible to read "Varieties" without playing it off against these other Bernstein works in which he has subjected Dewey and more recently the Big four--Arendt, Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty--to serious criticism while still finding in them insights into "the problems of men" without which we would be at great loss. My reading, then, creates and exacerbates already existing tensions in "Varieties" and accounts in part for my difficulties with it.

Bernstein in less inspirational tone, in more critical voice, hovers over his John Dewey Lecture. The kind of questions Bernstein has put to others, to obtain concrete social and political knowledge, must ultimately be put to Bernstein. Otherwise we shall remain at a dangerous level of abstraction--confronted and appealed to by a vision of democratic pluralism (one impossible to deny) that is to function in a society we recognize through the familiarity of a commonsense understanding, which by its nature lacks depth and critical insight. Bernstein's Deweyan roots and his own published work tell us that vision joined to commonsense understanding is not enough.

Like all writing, Bernstein's lecture speaks to us and the world by creating a universe of meaning and discourse which beckons us to enter. What is the world of Bernstein's "The Varieties of Pluralism"?

It is several worlds. It is a world of messaged hope grounded in the history of philosophy and the nature of praxis. It is a world in which there is a second chance which will not become farce because the first chance has yet to become exhausted--or realized. We still possess the gift that is Dewey and the best of the pragmatic understanding of phronesis and democratic pluralism. We are in position to reinvent and use them, now aided by the work of current advocates and reinventors of phronesis, be their terrain ontological investigation or socio-historical critique. In Bernstein's

universe, current history and the dialectical relation of the nature and actual existence of the world, the nature and present state of knowledge, and the nature of present realization of our human nature, combine to demand the reconstruction and commitment to phronesis and the society it can produce because we are creatures of telos in a society that denies us our truly realized being. And our true being must out. Current history is past and present possibility struggling with a collection of horror tales.

Bernstein's lectured world is a world of faith, wisdom, and necessity. Faith is a Deweyan like vision of community. It is "a type of society in which we can at once respect and even celebrate differences and plurality but always strive to understand and seek a common ground with what is other and different." (p. 15) It is a society in which we ought to (and therefore can?) "cultivate phronesis and reflective intelligence, to learn to listen, speak, and act with others in mutual understanding, a mutual understanding (that) can recognize and honor genuine difference." (p. 17) Not mentioned here is the appropriate treatment for genuine differences--as practices--which under no sense of the imagination deserve respect.

Phronesis is the path, the way. Phronesis truly and fully realized is democratic pluralism, but it is more. It is a form of wisdom. Phronesis is human intelligence in its best practical response to the nature of human society to situations that demand we act. It is born of necessity, the necessity of seeking in knowledge only the precision permitted us by the nature of the situations that demand we act, the situations that are both objects and means of our inquiry and action, the situations about which there are propositions of the form: "M. N. should do this and so; it is better, wiser, more prudent, right, advisable, opportune, expedient, etc., to act thus and so...."[1]

Bernstein's universe of discourse is also a political cautionary tale intended for the left. The right in its most reactionary and extreme formulations and social formations is without doubt abhorrent to Bernstein. He does not address it. Perhaps because it cannot be warned. Paradoxically, some of its adherents can be saved from

themselves only by the success of their adversaries. The center in part defines itself by seeking to maintain or resuscitate what it understands to be the best of our troubled situations. It neither knows nor comprehends emancipation or totality. It is not the audience for a cautionary tale. The left understands that for the best of the Deweyan vision to become actuality, a radical transformation of social, political, and economic institutions is entailed. A new political geography and its proper subjects must be created. Bernstein's universe of discourse is the call for and justification of an emancipatory phronesis, those actions which help us to realize and change our human nature. It is also the assertion that there is no alternative. And to repeat, it is a cautionary tale, reminding us of what results from utilizing technical reason where it does not belong--in the construction of a new polis--or from following totalities, even those constructed in the interests of emancipation, in a world in which there "is no single totality in which everything can be encompassed." They turn into terror and violence.

Bernstein's lectured universe finds and places us in an extremely trying and difficult situation. I want to ask of the lecture one basic question which informed my reading of it and helped shape my conclusions. The question is simply this: What happens to the content of "The Varieties of Pluralism" when it is confronted by Bernstein himself hard at work elsewhere?

In Beyond Objectivism and Relativism Bernstein subjects Gadamer to telling criticism about the meaning he gives to the term understanding. He also puts some very hard questions to him about the nature and dynamics of our society. I shall quote Bernstein at some length because what he says can and should be directed to "The Varieties of Pluralism." Bernstein says of Gadamer:

> Gadamer's philosophic hermeneutics does not include a detailed understanding of how power as domination (Herrschaft)--the type of domination that deforms praxis--operates in the modern world...,the point we need to be aware of is this: the danger for contemporary praxis is not techne, but domination...,no intellectual orientation that seeks to illuminate concrete praxis in the

> contemporary world can be judged adequate if it fails to confront questions concerning the character, dynamics, and tactics of power and domination.[2]

Gadamer, according to Bernstein,

> acutely analyzes the deformation of _praxis_ in the contemporary world, and yet on the other hand he seems to suggest, regardless of the type of community in which we live, that _phronesis_ is always a real possibility...,(H)e stops short of facing the issues of what is to be done when the _polis_ or community itself is 'corrupt'—when there is a breakdown of its _nomoi_ and of rational discourse about the norms that ought to govern our practical lives....He tells us that the contemporary understanding of practical reason as 'technical control' has degraded the concept of _praxis_. But if this is true--and I certainly agree that it is--then one wants to know what is it about modern societies that has _caused_ this to happen....Without some sort of theoretical understanding and explanation of the structure and dynamics of modern technological society, there is always the real danger that _praxis_ will be ineffectual, merely abstract. Let us not forget that _praxis_ requires choice, deliberation, and decision about what is to be done in concrete situations. Informed action requires us to try to understand and explain the salient characteristics of the situations we confront.[3]

The importance of Gadamer's analytic shortcomings is underlined as we read Bernstein's description of our chaotic and confusing times, the times that produce wild pluralisms and false and misleading totalities. Bernstein says:

> A community or a _polis_ is not something that can be made or engineered by some form of _techne_ or by the administration of society...The coming into being of a type of public life that can strengthen solidarity, public freedom, a willingness to talk and to listen, mutual debate, and a commitment to rational persuasion presupposes the incipient forms of such communal life. [However, we live] in a situation in which there is a breakdown of such communities, and where the very conditions of social life have the consequences of furthering such a breakdown....in addition to the attempt to recover and reclaim the autonomy of practical rationality and show its relevance to all domains of culture, we realize today the type of dialogical communities that are required for its flourishing are being distorted, undermined, and systematically blocked from coming into existence.[4]

Bernstein asks Habermas: "Under what conditions will agents who have a clear understanding of their historical situation be motivated to overcome distorted communication and strive toward an ideal form of community life? What are the concrete dynamics of this process? Who are or will become its agents?"[5] Neither one

answers the question. Bernstein caps it off saying Habermas is right when he confronts "our historical situation" and declares it is one in which "'both revolutionary self-confidence and theoretical self-certainty are gone.'"[6] (In the world so described the loss of revolutionary self-confidence and theoretical self-confidence may be a blessing in disguise.) But what is it that systematically blocks the needed dialogical communities from coming into existence? Perhaps the John Dewey Lecture was not the occasion for Bernstein to start upon detailed answers to the questions he asks others. And perhaps Bernstein the philosopher should not be expected to provide answers.

But the lecture seriously undercuts itself in not reminding us that these questions must be asked and answers sought if phronesis is to be informed judgment about situations that demand we act. In Bernstein's universe of discourse, the appeal of intelligence at work is inspired by the moderation of Aristotle, Deweyan method, and post Frankfurt critical theory. It is now protected (seek not totality!) from its own self-destructive possibilities or even proclivities but it too easily establishes abstract phronesis as the way. The text admits of no other practice. The world depicted by the text admits no other way. But according to Bernstein, in texts outside the lecture, the world has not been sufficiently queried as to its nature by its important philosophic investigators. What the unasked questions may tell us about phronesis, pluralism, and mutual respect for all honest differences remains to be seen. Some answers and insights will come as results of new social practice, according to Dewey's practical judgment. But again we must call for theory and specifics respecting a Deweyan indeterminate situation that demands we act.

Bernstein's call for phronesis is, I believe, an expression of hope, a philosophic statement of means to overcome "wild pluralism," i.e., the politics of nihilism, and a statement that things are even worse than they appear. Phronesis is the mediation of a universal and a judgment of a particular situation, but today we apparently lack the universals. In fact, however, the ethical universals of classical philosophy and the

universals of the great bourgeois revolutions still exist but in the present form of their historically concrete realization they have suffered class based political and technological deformation. How to bring into existence their more fully realized humane content, some form of socialist based democracy, is both philosophic and extra-philosophic project. The peculiar existence of the great political-ethical universals speaks to the peculiar intellectual tension that is philosophy. In the domain of social thought, philosophy at its best is finely honed critical response to social problems not primarily of philosophy's own making nor problems that philosophy alone can solve. This is a problematic all who pursue philosophy must contend with. The intellectual problem that is philosophy paradoxically emerges most fully formed but also best concealed in well wrought philosophy. It is here that the power of philosophy's content and method, of philosophic argument, conceals from itself and its followers the problematic that is philosophy. But it is just here in the riches of well wrought philosophy that we have the greatest opportunity to learn to see ourselves truly. This is the opportunity that is Bernstein's lecture.

Bernstein's lecture is advance and return. It is a multifaceted philosophical advance beyond the recent obsession with "radical relativism and incommensurability." (p. 3) It is appropriate return, given Dewey's history, that Bernstein now joins with others in a rethinking of part of our Aristotelian heritage. Bernstein's basic perspective on social change was well expressed early on. Replying to "existentialist" criticisms of Dewey's understanding of what constitutes our true human problems and condition Bernstein said, "Dewey's entire philosophy is an argument that the method of intelligence is our best resource and guide for living...Dewey's imperative certainty lacks the glamour of more extremist philosophies, but his sane, piecemeal approach to reconstruction of human experience is undoubtedly a more realistic and ultimately more effective guide for meeting our problems and making human existence more livable."[7]

The appeal of Bernstein's Dewey, of Dewey himself, to sane methods of social reconstruction directed by Deweyan intelligence gives Dewey's perspective and method the compelling status of near self-evident truth. By joining the sane to the piecemeal, the peaceful is implied. And the non-piecemeal is now implicitly joined to the not-sane and the not-peaceful. Who will reject the call for social change as the sane, piecemeal, and peaceful resolution of indeterminate situations which carry within themselves new, rational, objective, communally acceptable determinations? There is the problem that the appeal of method can ideologically establish the nature of reality, when in fact reality should determine the validity of the method. Concealed in the magic of Dewey's dialectic are 1) the undemonstrated assumption that Deweyan phronesis, Theory of Valuation as outline of a program of social theory and action, is adequate to society as it is, and 2) Dewey's a-theoretical dissection of our body politic. We are left with no vocabulary to provide critical entrance and leverage adequate to society today. This is why Bernstein will not have us read Dewey's texts for "truth" but rather calls for a sublation of his vision and spirit. But this has proved a knotty task, in part producing the real possibility of a square circle in Bernstein's universe.

J. H. Randall, Jr., remarks that when Aristotle discusses phronesis he is "clearly thinking here in terms of medical diagnosis,..."[8] Aristotelian medicine, like education, succeeds through cooperation with its object. But our object, the body politic, is such that it can cooperate with itself at best in varying degrees of ill health. Bernstein's lecture speaks to new, or, really, old-fashioned highly desirable final causes for our community-to-be. This is a necessary condition of our improved health. But final causes have a tendency to take on the cover of ideology. The well being of phronesis, of our very selves, now requires critical identification of efficient, material, and formal causes that brought us to our present precarious condition and sustain us in it. This, as Bernstein knows, is the way to informed phronesis. This is the stuff of another John Dewey Lecture--some good Bernstein questions put to "The Varieties of Pluralism."

FOOTNOTES

[1]John Dewey, "The Logic of Judgments of Practise," in Sidney Morgenbesser, ed., Dewey and His Critics (New York: The Journal of Philosophy, Inc., 1977), p. 567.

[2]Richard J. Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp. 156-160.

[3]Beyond Objectivism, pp. 158-159.

[4]Beyond Objectivism, pp. 226, 230.

[5]Richard J. Bernstein, The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 224.

[6]Beyond Objectivism, p. 227; Bernstein quoting Jurgen Habermas from "A Reply to My Critics" in John B. Thompson and David Held, eds., Habermas: Critical Debates (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1982), p. 222.

[7]Richard J. Bernstein, John Dewey (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), p. 177.

[8]John Herman Randall, Jr., Aristotle (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 268.